

GROWING FAMILIES™...

A Newsletter For Those Who Care For Childbearing Families and Neonates

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©PREVENTING NON-INTENTIONAL INJURIES IN THE NEWBORN

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Behavioral Objectives: After reading this newsletter the learner will be able to:

1. Discuss 4 common safety hazards in the newborn period, with related preventative strategies.
2. Discuss the role of the healthcare provider in prevention non-intentional injuries in the newborn.

Non-intentional injuries are a leading cause of death and disability in children in the US. Each year, the lives of many thousands of Americans are adversely affected by tragedies such as motor vehicle accidents, drowning, falls, burns and suffocation. One of the keys to reducing the incidence of these "accidents" is effective parent education, ideally beginning in pregnancy. The healthcare provider can significantly impact the health and safety of children by teaching parents about age-appropriate safety issues, beginning with the newborn period.

This newsletter will focus on prevention of unintentional injuries during the newborn period. Common safety concerns related to this age group will be highlighted, including safe practices within and outside of the home. Positive actions that parents can take to keep their newborns safe will be discussed, as well.



NEWBORNS... A SAFETY RISK?

Because of their limited mobility, newborns may be considered "easier" to keep safe than older infants and toddlers. However, they still require the constant care and attention of a competent adult caregiver to stay safe and healthy.

Newborns have certain physical and developmental characteristics that increase their risk for unintentional injury. The newborn head is large and heavy, in relation to the rest of the body. And, the muscles of the head and neck are not sufficiently developed to hold the head up or to control it. This makes the newborn more likely to hit head-first if a fall occurs. Cognitively, the newborn, of course, has no awareness of safety hazards, and cannot make even the basic attempts at self-protection that an older infant can, for example by putting his or her arms out to break a fall. For these reasons, the parent or other caretaker is entirely responsible for maintaining the safety and well-being of the newborn.

Safety teaching should begin during pregnancy, to provide a knowledge base during a time when parents-to-be are often making important decisions regarding baby equipment, such as cribs and car seats. A wide variety of newborn safety topics should be covered with the parents, to increase safety during this time and to provide a foundation for safe practices as the child grows and develops. Emphasis should be placed on vigilant care at all times, within the home and when traveling in motor vehicles.

PREVENTING COMMON SAFETY HAZARDS

Newborns are subject to many of the types of unintentional injuries suffered by infants and older children:

Falls: Falls are the leading cause of unintentional injury in the newborn period. The newborn may fall from a piece of equipment or furniture, such as a changing table, or from a caregiver's arms. Even though newborns cannot crawl, their arm and leg movements or reflex activity can cause them to move across a surface and fall. For this reason, a caregiver should always stand close to and have one hand over the newborn when he or she is on any surface. Likewise, an infant carrier should not be placed on a surface unless someone is standing close by. If the parent must leave the newborn to attend to something quickly, the floor is a much safer place for the newborn than a couch, table or other surface.

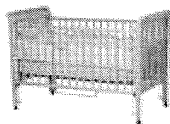


Parents should take great care not to trip or fall when carrying their newborn. Stairs are particularly hazardous, and should be kept free of clutter.

Motor Vehicle Injuries: Use of an approved car seat is a safety essential, beginning with the first car ride. Parents should be advised to choose a car seat that meets current safety standards and that is designed for infant use. Older car seats should not be used unless they can clearly be shown to meet these standards. Newborns must ride in the back seat, facing the rear, and preferably in the middle seat. The newborn must never be left in the car while the parent runs an errand, even for a few seconds. Heat stroke or abduction are just two of the disasters that may result. Parents must take their newborn with them every time they leave the car.

This newsletter is intended only as a guide when caring for patients... use your professional judgment.

Suffocation: A possible cause of suffocation is a crib that does not meet current safety standards. While cribs manufactured today must meet these standards, this is not the case for cribs obtained as "hand-me-downs" or purchased at yard sales. Crib slats should be no wider than 2 3/8 inches apart and the mattress must fit snugly against the crib. There should be no corner posts that might catch the infant's clothing, and no cut-out areas in the headboard or footboard. Parents should be cautioned not to place the crib near windows with cords hanging down, such as from window blinds. There should be no pillows, large stuffed animals, or other objects in the crib that may cause suffocation. Also, the newborn should never be placed on a soft surface, such as a pillow, bean bag chair, or waterbed. Other common practices that increase the risk for suffocation include tying a pacifier around the baby's neck and covering the crib mattress with a dry-cleaner plastic bag.



Poisoning: Two sources of household poisoning include lead and carbon monoxide. Lead paint used in homes built before 1978 may create dust that is inhaled or swallowed by the newborn, such as by sucking on a fist or pacifier. Lead is neurotoxic and may cause serious problems, such as learning disabilities and seizures. Paint in older homes should be tested and, if found to contain lead, professionally treated. Frequent damp-wiping of surfaces and washing of pacifiers, bottle nipples, and the baby's hands help to reduce this risk.

Carbon monoxide, a tasteless, odorless gas, may also cause illness or death if it builds up in homes. A home carbon monoxide detector helps to protect against this hazard. Parents should be cautioned never to leave their newborn in a running car, especially in an enclosed garage.

Inadvertent over-medication may also cause poisoning in newborns. Medications, even over-the-counter drugs, should be given to newborns only on a physician's advice. Guidelines for appropriate dosage and frequency must be carefully followed. Newborns may also suffer harm from exposure to substances in breast milk. Therefore, mothers who breastfeed should use medications cautiously and only on the advice of a physician who knows they are breastfeeding. And, of course, it is extremely important that breastfeeding mothers avoid illicit drugs and other substances of abuse.

Burns: Fire, hot liquids, stoves, and the sun can all contribute to burns in newborns. To provide early warning of fire, all houses should have at least one working smoke detector on each floor. Newborn pajamas should be snug-fitting and made of flame-retardant material. To prevent accidental scalding, household water heaters should be set to < 120°F (49°F). The bath water should be added before the newborn is placed in the tub, and checked for proper temperature. If water must be added when the newborn is in the tub, parents should be instructed to turn on the cold faucet first, then turn on the hot faucet until the water is warm. The hot faucet should then be turned off before the cold faucet.



The tender skin of newborns can be easily sunburned. Newborns should be kept out of hot, direct sunlight, and should have their extremities and heads covered for protection when sun exposure is anticipated. The American Academy of Pediatrics now advises that small amounts of sunscreen can be used on children less than 6 months of age, if necessary.

The kitchen poses another possible hazard for newborns. If formula is warmed in the microwave, areas may become very hot, burning the newborn's mouth.

Bottles should be heated until the chill is removed, then shaken to avoid hot spots. Parents should always test the temperature by squirting onto the wrist before feeding. Pots cooking on the stove can also pose a hazard for newborns. Parents should avoid working near the stove while holding the baby. As tempting as it may be to give the sauce a quick stir, this may result in hot splashes to the newborn or setting the newborn's blanket or clothing on fire.

Drowning: Due to their lack of self-protective mechanisms, newborns can drown in very small amounts of water. Constant supervision and physical contact with the parent is a must for newborns during baths. Parents should be cautioned not to rely on specially designed tubs or safety rings to keep the baby safe from drowning. All supplies should be gathered before the bath so that the parent does not have to move to get soap, shampoo or a towel. If the parent must attend to something quickly, the baby should be wrapped in a towel and taken with the parent.

Other Injuries: Newborns are also susceptible to injury from rough handling and "attacks" from siblings and pets. The "rough-housing" that some parents, especially fathers, enjoy with toddlers and older children is not safe during the newborn period. Newborns should never be held upside down, swung by their arms or legs, or thrown into the air. Also, parents should never leave the newborn alone with young children or pets, both of whom may show unpredictable behavior.



Through thorough parent education, the healthcare provider plays a key role in preventing unintentional injuries in the newborn.

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